

(SC-228-90): 1st Michigan Volunteer Infantry Regiment (3 Months)

The First Michigan was the first “western” regiment to answer Lincoln’s call for volunteers. Ten militias from various parts of the state arrived in Detroit for training and equipping. On May 1, 1861, they were mustered into U.S. service for three months. On May 11, 1861 the regiment marched into the Campus Martius in Detroit to receive their colors. Thousands looked on.

The regimental color presented that day was the very first battle flag presented to a Michigan regiment. Procured by the ladies of Detroit, it was presented by D. Bethune Duffield. It was described as being of very heavy silk fringed with gold. Upon one side was the U.S. coat of arms and on the other the Michigan coat of arms with the words “Michigan’s Daughters To Her Sons--Defend It.” “Thank God for Michigan!” said Lincoln upon the First’s arrival in Washington.

On July 21, the regiment participated in its only battle at Bull Run, near Manassas, Virginia. Bull Run was a resounding defeat for the Union, but the First acquitted itself well. Of the 500 men who went into action that day, 117 were casualties, including the regiment’s commander, Colonel Willcox, who was wounded and taken prisoner. The flag was captured--an ignoble fate for the first Michigan battle flag! Sent to Richmond, it was recovered after the war and forwarded to Washington--NOT back to Michigan. It took years to get the flag home to Michigan because the regiment had to prove that the capture of the flag did not reflect discredit on the troops. It took the efforts of then-governor Russell Alger to secure the return of the flag, which arrived in Michigan in May of 1886 in time for the old First’s reunion. Afterwards, W.H. Withington (who had been a colonel of the regiment) forwarded the flag to the Adjutant General to join the other flags in the Capitol, along with this note: “It blessed the eyes of the old First Michigan boys who saw it once more after the lapse of twenty-five years.”